

Culture Clash in the Classroom: How to Minimize Cheating in a Face-Saving Culture

By Bruce T. Sidebotham

Different cultural values can lead to some interesting and sometimes humorous shocks. What do you do about cheating in a culture where one of the highest social values-avoidance of confrontation and embarrassments-gives "veto power" to the students? After trial and error and much reflection, I found a way to enforce academic values of integrity and fairness without embarrassing either students or myself. Here is how I weathered this cross-cultural storm in Sumatra. Press.

The first quiz I gave to my class of forty-five beginning-level freshmen nearly five years ago was a joke. Students freely looked at each other's work, talked to each other, and walked around the room (ostensibly to replace a pen that had stopped writing or to borrow whiteout)-all of this after I'd clearly explained during the course introduction that cheaters would automatically fail quizzes and tests.

For the second and third period classes of 80 more beginning-level freshmen, I was as direct and intimidating as I knew how to be, explaining in no uncertain English and Indonesian terms that cheaters would fail. This modified the behavior only slightly. Most still cheated, some more blatantly than others, and these failed. That some of my students failed a quiz for cheating did not in the least deter further cheating. It only seemed to confuse them and work against the rapport I was trying to build.

I began asking Indonesian colleagues if cheating was tolerated and how they dealt with instances. Every person I asked told me that cheating was not tolerated and any students caught cheating automatically failed the quiz or test they were taking. This only increased my frustration. Every time I gave a test I had to play the Gestapo, and I was still not able to eliminate cheating.

Then came the time for final exams and I was asked to help supervise some of the exam sessions with other teachers. I was shocked. At first things seemed to be pretty orderly, but as the exam period drew near to its end, these same teachers who had told me that cheating was in no way tolerated would just look the other way if a student borrowed a pencil, talked to a friend, or looked at someone else's paper. I asked the teachers why they didn't do anything and they just replied that cheating was not allowed.

Apparently, maintaining peace and harmony is all-important. Avoiding embarrassing someone else is just as important as avoiding embarrassment. Avoiding direct confrontation is one of the highest social values going.

At first my task seemed hopeless, but understanding the dynamics of how a shame-and face-saving culture plays itself out in the classroom enabled me to discover some ways to uphold my own academic standards without violating cultural values. Now I am no longer confused or frustrated and I have managed to eliminate nearly all cheating. Here's how:

I no longer make any issue of cheating. Of course I parrot the standard line that anyone caught cheating will fail the test, but I do not implement this threat. I turn the issue into "following directions." In terms of saving face it is a lot less serious to get caught "not following directions" than it is to get caught "cheating." Culturally it is nearly impossible to accuse anyone of cheating, but anybody can make a mistake now and then, so no one is seriously offended with such a judgement. The consequences are lightened accordingly. Anyone caught looking at someone else's paper, talking to a neighbor, or in any way interacting with another class member has their score lowered one letter grade for each infringement of the directions. With such rules in force I have rarely had to actually lower anyone's grade. A couple of times I've had someone try to make a scene and object, "But I wasn't cheating" (of course they really were), and offer some excuse like, "I was just asking for the time." I just respond, "If I was accusing you of cheating you'd get a zero. You're just losing one letter grade. You've just confessed you didn't follow my directions. Is there anything unfair in that?"

Bruce T. Sidebotham teaches future high school English teachers at the University of Bung Hatta in the Department of Education and Teacher Training in Padang.